

Why public spaces in European cities are becoming homogenized

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Credit: Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne

European public spaces are becoming more original, but also more

homogeneous. The author of an architecture thesis, written at EPFL, explains this paradox and calls on critics and public authorities to do something about it.

For almost two decades, designers of public spaces throughout Europe have been striving to give passers-by unique experiences. Using a multitude of materials, shapes, interactive street furniture and sensory effects, these squares, streets and walkways are becoming genuine tourist attractions for their cities. The problem is that, rather than integrating with the existing urban environment, the public spaces of the 21st century are tending to diverge from it intentionally and, most importantly, to look alike.

This is one of the findings in Sonia Curnier's thesis, which she researched at EPFL's Theory and History of Architecture Laboratory (LTH2), supervised by Bruno Marchand. Until now, academic research has mainly focused on the use of public spaces, for example observing whether or not passers-by really connect with them, but spent very little time looking at their design. This is the novel approach taken by Curnier's thesis, which offers the first comprehensive overview of the subject. The public defense of his Ph.D. will take place on 2 May at EPFL.



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Curnier looked at numerous architectural reviews, both in print and online, along with reference books and catalogues, and analyzed the most striking public-space projects of the last 15 years. For 14 of the projects, she carried out site visits, met the designers and consulted the project archives. Her conclusion is clear: "By creating increasingly distinctive projects, designers are making public spaces independent of their environment and turning them into objects that can be transposed from one city to another. Instead of responding to their surrounding context, these spaces are addressing more universal concerns and references, and

end up merely responding to themselves," says Curnier, whose public defense will take place at EPFL on 2 May. She sees two main consequences: first, the network of public spaces is becoming fragmented, with each space being understood as a separate entity. Second, the same ideas regarding urban amenities are circulating via architectural reviews, and are intentionally being replicated from one city to the next. The end result is that public spaces are becoming homogenized across Europe, and indeed around the world.

A new brief

How did we get to this situation? In the interviews she carried out, Curnier saw the importance that contemporary designers – architects, urban planners and landscape designers – place on stimulating the imagination and senses of passers-by, by combining colors, scents and optical effects. The idea is not so much to provide a functional space as to create a destination and an experience that is both unique and collective. For example, a fountain is no longer just a water feature but a space for children to play, and a bench is no longer just for sitting on but also a place to lie down. This desire to create experiences appeals to universal principles of perception – those of the human body – which can therefore be transposed from one context to another.



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In addition, these new public spaces often have the brief of breathing new life into locations lacking any major architectural merit, whereas previous projects focused on iconic settings. This brief seems to be prompting certain cities to adopt rather extravagant projects, Curnier found. For example, the cities of St. Gallen, Glasgow, Copenhagen and Berlin have covered ground with red paint in order to distinguish their public spaces (see photos). Having initially been designed to stand out, these different spaces now look alike.

Strong narrative dimension

Curnier also found that designers are placing great importance on telling stories. Their designs are becoming increasingly divorced from their built environment, by including historical, cultural and symbolic references. Designers are unconsciously copying these references from one city to the next, although the discourses they adopt may differ. For example, paver lights on a path in Geneva mark the former outline of Lake Geneva, while in Copenhagen, they symbolize a starry sky, meant to recall the observatory that formerly occupied the site. However, the visual effect is similar (see photos).



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Curnier also observed that, in all cases, there was a disconnect between the initial concept and the finished project. "I know that projects can evolve between their design and construction phases. However, if they do, then designers need to adjust their discourse. Also, after the spaces have been opened to the public, critics will cheerfully focus on the designers' initial discourse, ignoring how the finished [project](#) diverges from it," she says. She also found that designers easily end up manipulating references, using symbols to reproduce environments that are universally recognizable – like a forest, a river or even sand dunes –

in an urban setting. These references are made using stereotyped formal motifs such as lines on the ground and artificial trees, thus leading to a homogenization of public spaces. That said, these references are often lost on passers-by.

Pointing the finger at public authorities and critics

Although she is not against the profusion of creativity currently taking place, Curnier believes that it could be harnessed more effectively. She calls on public authorities to take more of an interest in these issues, and invites them to be skeptical about flashy projects. "Municipal authorities are failing to do their duty. They tend to look at projects on a case-by-case basis, with no overall long-term strategy," she says. At the same time, she believes that architectural and landscape publications should take a more critical view of public-[space](#) projects in Europe, and she found that many architects and landscape designers – famous or otherwise – lament the current lack of criticism.



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Finally, although the trend towards distinction and homogenization could be better controlled, Curnier notes that certain elements shared by these projects are simply reflections of our time: "In all eras, public spaces have sought to reflect an ideal, such as the monarchy, the democratic revolution or the leisure society. We are now in a globalized society, a society of stories and images. A society that celebrates unique and immediate experiences. This is inevitably being reflected in our [public spaces](#)."

Provided by Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne

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